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Salvador death-squad leader becomes right's hope

Military, middle class back ultra-rightist

By Joseph Boyd
Special to The Christian Science Monitor
Santa Ana, El Salvador

The dashing, tough-talking politician galvanizes his crowd in this small western El Salvador town to cheer, chant, and sing.

His rousing political rallies — held every weekend in country towns and cities — look at first blush like signs of democracy flowering in this nation run by a joint military-civilian junta.

But this popular politician is Roberto d'Aubuisson, a former Army major who built his reputation as chief of the paramilitary *esquadrón de muerte* — the death squad. US diplomats are not hopeful that a victory by his Nationalist Republican Alliance (ARENA) in elections March 28 would signal a green light for democracy.

At a rally here in Santa Ana the loud-speaker blares the ARENA marching song, which says, "El Salvador will be the tomb where we bury the Reds."

The main target of D'Aubuisson's words, however, are not communists or guerrillas, but the Christian Democratic Party (PCD), which governs the country in cooperation with the Army.

D'Aubuisson calls the Christian Democrats the "right wing of the Communist Party," and compares them to watermelons — green outside and red inside.

He flays the ruling party for the nation's economic crisis, asking the crowd, "Do you live better than you did before the Christian Democrats came to power?"

"We will let the Army go and finish off the communists in six months" if ARENA wins, d'Aubuisson says.

On his speaker's platform, ARENA's leader looks like a hero — lean and handsome. He appears younger than 38 and still cuts the image of the dashing young officer. He wears a pistol on his hip. Muscles bulge when he takes off his embroidered *guayabera* shirt, exposing a tight T-shirt emblazoned with the party emblem.

D'Aubuisson's bold campaign style and tough reputation are winning support for ARENA among those who oppose the reform path of the Christian Democrats and the leftist revolt. His earliest supporters

als, and retired military officers. Much of his grass-roots support comes from the officially disbanded, but still very active, anticommunist — paramilitary — group, ORDEN, once a force of 100,000.

ARENA is the only party to take its campaign into towns and cities with publicized rallies. Other candidates say they won't announce rallies in advance for "security reasons."

Former US Ambassador to El Salvador Robert White has called d'Aubuisson a "pathological killer" and accused him of ordering the assassination of Archbishop Oscar Arnulfo Romero, the Roman Catholic primate of San Salvador, in 1980. D'Aubuisson denies the charge.

ARENA's leader was a major in the armed forces and head of the Salvadoran National Guard intelligence service until he was cashiered in 1978 for brutality and plotting a coup.

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Although D'Aubuisson is winning support in the countryside, he is a target of opposition as well. In San Salvador, ARENA's party headquarters were machine-gunned Feb. 26. The following day

d'Aubuisson aborted a helicopter landing in San Sebastian when guerrillas attacked the town. His convoy was attacked while returning from the airport the same day.

D'Aubuisson was slightly wounded in the right arm in the assault, but there is some question about how the injury was inflicted since he was traveling in an armored station wagon and the attack came from the left side.

About 100 people waited for d'Aubuisson in his Santa Ana campaign office, a large white Spanish colonial style house on a quiet downtown street the day this reporter visited.

D'Aubuisson drew a well-dressed crowd: young men and women in designer jeans; ladies with pearls around their necks; and middle-aged men in fancy embroidered *guayabara* shirts. They ate pastries and drank punch while waiting for their leader.

For these people the key issue is the government's land reform program. They are afraid they will lose their plantations; some already have lost their land and want it